

Hello, folks. Here are notes from our meeting on 8/8/12 at the Tribune. Please review your quotes and let me know if, based on your quotes, you are willing to be a part of the article.

Please know that these quotes will stand as is, if you choose to be part of the story. As part of our ethical obligation as journalists, we do not edit direct quotes. If you decide not to be part of the story, that is perfectly **fine. Your quote will not be used.** We don't use anonymous sources. I know you have your concerns, for good reasons, about attaching your name to this story. But I want to make one last plea to you guys to know that the more voices we have behind this story, the more valid it becomes. The more valid it becomes, the more likely it is to evoke a reaction from the community. The more reaction it evokes from the community, the more likely it is to cause change. **Cathy and Sharlene** have agreed to be part of this story and **let us use their comments from our meeting, as well as asking them follow-up questions if we need.** Also, if I have some of the factual information incorrect, especially in reference to the timeline of when the new case worker model went into effect or how cases used to be divvied up, please let me know.

Please take a look (also note that I haven't run a spell check yet and haven't spelled names correctly yet ... but I WILL if you give me the OK!)

"It's a tough job and you need people to support you," Vicki Leigland said, who left in 2008.

Shelly Stone, CFSD employee in various capacities for 8 years (lastly as CPS).

Cathy Blackbird, left in January (worn out) after 4 years with CFSD.

Sharlene Barragan, worked there 11 years. Quit once and came back.

Cathy Blackbird said she gave her two weeks notice in January, but right before she was supposed to have a family group meeting, they told her it was best for her to leave right away, even though she would be paid through the two weeks. No explanation. Couldn't get her stuff right away.

Problems? Complaints from parents about the department pulling kids out of home unwarranted...

"We've never had the authority to just take anyone's kids," Stone said.

Barragan said she was forced to write an affidavit once by her supervisors and testified to that fact. When she quit her job, she could no longer find work anywhere because she was blacklisted.

Barragan and Blackbird said after October Perez's death the GF office was told by supervisors that state was

going to come in and review every one of their files.

Sarah Corbelly came and spent a week straight going through the files with supervisors last year.

"They were there day and night," Barragan said.

Blackbird said she was put in the awkward position of having to review a case of one of her new supervisors.

Barragan said the week that Corbelly was in Great Falls, there was a huge removal of kids from their homes, like 20 to 30 kids.

How it has worked when investigating

When a CPS goes out to investigate, their investigation is supposed to be turned over to a supervisor. But in Great Falls, workers said their cases went straight over their direct supervisors to Cory Costello's desk.

"Cases were supposed to go to a regional administrator, but they went over (her) head (to Costello, who had once served as a regional administrator and is now field services director). For a long time she did both."

"Cory was the one making the decisions all along," Shelly said.

Failing children

Vicki said she got out in 2008, because she could see the writing on the wall and knew there was the potential for children to fall terribly through the cracks.

"I knew it was going to happen," Leigland said. "There was this whole culture that was going on before October Perez."

Cory Costello, the main problem

Leigland said when Cory first started working with their office she and Cory got along fine.

"She wasn't that bad when she first started," Leigland said.

But over time, Cory decided she no longer liked Leigland, who had become a supervisor and had planted seeds of doubt about some of her employees. Leigland said Costello forced her to fire a couple of employees.

"Nobody trusts anybody, and you can't say anything," Leigland said.

Shawn said Costello had "targeted" her for some reason and started finding small ways to pick her apart. Whether it was telling her she couldn't bring her Mickey Mouse purse to work or writing that she didn't notify a parent quick enough, Shawn said Costello found little reasons to pick at her.

Barragan said she would be "staffing" cases with supervisor Marty Vining and Costello and Costello would be in those meetings texting her daughter.

Barragan said she would meet and interview a family two, three or four times and find nothing wrong, only to have Costello tell her to keep picking away at the case.

"She wanted me out," Barragan said.

Stone said there were always little bits and pieces of problems that would eventually mount into large problems with Costello.

How did this prevent a social worker from doing their job?

"You could not make a decision," Shawn said, for fear of retribution.

"You can't make decisions because you are afraid to," Leigland said.

Changing the way cases are worked

Former employees said case workers used to be organized in three ways and specialized in three different areas. There were case workers who did the intake, meaning they did the initial investigation. Then the next group of workers would do the investigation/transition piece of cases and worked intensively with families, and there were other case workers who specialized in coming up with permanency arrangements for kids.

Under Costello's leadership in the Great Falls office, they began a new "pilot" program where a caseworker would stay with a family from start to finish.

Leigland said the switch was made supposedly because supervisors were having trouble transferring cases between each set of social workers, but she never agreed with the idea.

Because one specialist is handling a case, Barragan said reports are being put off 3, 4 and even five months, therefore leaving more kids in transition.

The former employees said it always seemed as if Great Falls' office was "piloting" something Cory had thought of.

The negative work environment

Sharlene said a number of old case workers were on anti-depressants.

Because they have churned through so many workers in this office, the new supervisors are not equipped to be supervisors, Shelly said.

Blackbird said she contacted her union rep twice, to no avail. She's dealt with a lot of anxiety as well.

Shawn said the internal work environment was so bad, "dealing with stupid parents was the highlight of my day."

It's not lack of pay or high case loads that have driven these case workers away

"They've told me it's not the money," said Rep. Cleve Loney. "It was the administration."

Blackbird said she also took a huge pay cut to go work with her current employer, just to get out of the office.

She said it was so easy to get sucked into the internal drama in the office and believe others were conspiring against you. Blackbird said she always felt so overwhelmed and fearful.

"I had so much to do," she said. "I was fearful someone would fall through the cracks."

Affidavits have become part of the job requirement, even though some of the former case workers question why?

Over the years, the women don't believe there have been significant cuts to staffing in the regional office, just organizational changes.

The result of such cases and constantly working on intake of new cases, has resulted in permanency plans not getting taken care of in a timely fashion.

Leigland said the goal always seemed to be just to get them into foster care and go.

"The ones you know are safe, you just kind of forgot about them," she said.

The attitude of administrators and the fear of the workers is only going to worsen the problem if things aren't changed soon.

"There's going to be another dead child soon," Barragan said flatly.

New social workers must commit to a six-week course before taking on any cases at the University of Montana. But they don't believe that's happening with the newest hires in the regional office.

And the training, "was a joke" said Barragan and didn't translate to any of the real-world work that they were doing.

Changing reports/pleasing administration/safety concerns

Shawn said she would turn in a report on a family, only to have supervisors and Costello change her notes after the fact.

"I had reports that had been altered," she said.

"You'd rather piss off the parents than piss off co-workers," Barragan said.

Under Costello's leadership, Barragan said case workers were no longer sent out to calls to remove children in pairs. When asked what they should do, Barragan said Costello told them they should get the police to help. But the police aren't required to go and don't always want to/aren't available to go out with workers.

Barragan and Shawn said they were often going to homes of registered violent offenders or meth houses to remove children, for example.

"They've got to quit doing cost savings at the ground level and do it at the administrative levels," Loney said.

Blackbird said there were always way too many people trying to work on a case who weren't involved in the initial stages of the case.

"I remember thinking, God, there's too many chiefs here," she said. "That's why children are being harmed -- we have to do everything."

When these women worked for CFSD, very rarely, if ever, did a supervisor go out with the specialists on calls.

"In 11 years, I never had a supervisor go out with me," Barragan said.

Yet Blackbird said supervisors were changing cases after the fact for no apparent reason.

Blackbird said she had a case she'd worked on for three years and was ready to terminate the parents' rights, when a supervisor said, 'no.' And that they were going to work with the family, because the supervisor said they were too afraid to work with the judge. Blackbird said that was the beginning of her end at CFSD.

"Some cases (supervisors) will dig for anything to terminate (parental rights)," Barragan said. "Others they would just keep letting them go."

Stone said specialists were often told not to dig in too deep. They were told to just get the paperwork done "and get it off your desk."

Shawn said because they were often working with low-income families who had little to no education, the families didn't know how to fight or question what was happening.

"We could have substantiated abuse and supervisors would choose not to file (with the court)," she said.

When it came to substantiating abuse, the former case workers said they were often told to go to a specific doctors or psychologists to get the results they wanted.

"They do shop for who is going to testify," Barragan said.

Summing up the work environment

Shelly: "I was ready to go work at McDonalds when I quit."

"It's chaos," Blackbird said.

Shawn: "You cannot do your job and you cannot do it effectively and that's where kids get hurt."

Shelly: "This has got to stop."